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THE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER —OF— GEORGE WASHINGTON.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1891, IN SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH, NEW YORK CITY,

BEFORE

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY OF THE SONS OF THE REVOLUTION,

BY

WILLIAM STEVENS PERRY, D.D., *Oxon.*,

BISHOP OF IOWA,

PRESIDENT OF THE IOWA SOCIETY OF THE SONS OF THE REVOLUTION, AND A CHAPLAIN-GENERAL OF THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI.

DAVENPORT, IOWA,
1891.

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The Christian Character of Washington.*

The reverent student of our American history finds in its pages the tracings of the Hand of God. It was of Him, Who orderth the end from the beginning, that we date the genesis of our nationality, not from Columbus and Spain, but from Cabot, the discoverer of the continent, sailing under the flag of Saint George. Mexico, the South American republics,—all the Latin communities of the new world,—rightly trace their lineage to Spain. But it was of God that our mother-land refused to recognize the ecclesiastical fiat meting out the new world to Spaniards and Portuguese. It was of God that this refusal, maintained in many a struggle by sea and by land, and asserted at the cost of countless lives, secured the planting of our northern continent by English settlers, and gave our fathers from the very first the rights of free-born Englishmen. The rivalry between England and Spain, and, later, that with France; and the firm purpose of our

*Address delivered by the Bishop of Iowa, at S. Bartholomew's Church, New York, Feb. 22, 1891, before the Sons of the Revolution, of the State of New York, on occasion of the one hundred and fifty-ninth anniversary of the birth of George Washington, February 22, 1732.

ancestors across the sea to secure for England's crown and England's Church a share at least of the western world, were the moving causes of discovery and settlement three centuries ago. But for these rivalries of peoples and faiths, the United States of America would neither have been colonized as they were, nor, in fact, would they exist as they do to-day. God willed that our sires should be of the sturdy Anglo-Saxon race, trained for the building of a commonwealth by English institutions and a robust English faith. God willed that our heritage as a nation should be the English common law, the English Magna Charta, the English constitution, the English Bible, the English Book of Common Prayer. God thus willed that race and faith should play no unimportant part in the founding of our nationality, the acquisition of our freedom. The religious aspect of the schemes for the discovery and colonization of our American shores, undertaken and furthered by Gilbert, Raleigh, Popham, Gorges, De la Warr, and others of like chivalric spirit, and like Christian faith, compels attention no less than the political purposes these daring adventurers had in view. Men of our day and generation, impatient of creeds, of Churches, of Christ Himself, may claim that we are not a Christian nation; but it must ever remain true and undisputed that the foundations of our very being were laid in an intensity of prayer and in the

faith and fear of God! That Hand of God, so plainly seen in the events of our earliest history as a people, appears again and again in the annals of our later years. We may not linger to tell of the workings of Providence in the blending of races, faiths and families, out of which has come to us the realization of Europe's dream,—the world's desire—a free state and a free Church. It is of God, and not the happening of blind chance, that we are the descendants of the Cavalier Churchmen of Virginia and the stern, strict Puritans of New England, the sturdy burghers of New Amsterdam and the enthusiastic "Pilgrims of Maryland," the gallant Huguenots of South Carolina, the peace-loving disciples of George Fox, and the transplanted covenanters of the land of Knox,—English, Welsh, Scotch, Irish, Hollanders, Germans, French, Swiss, Swedes,—it is out of this commingling of peoples that God has made us what we are!

We may not pause to speak of marvellous interpositions, of strange, inexplicable providences, of wonderful reliefs, of unlooked-for successes, marking the presence of God's Hand in moulding and shaping our country's past. We cannot but believe, so marked, so evident, is this presence of a kind Providence at every step of our progress, that this land has yet some noble mission to effect in the approaching moral, political, religious, regeneration of the world. Ours is, indeed, the coming oppor-

tunity, ours has been the long and patient preparation; and in this glad and glorious future, so full of hope to all mankind, our fathers' God shall be our God, if we, with our fathers, recognize His presence and His power!

To-day,—and to those who gather in this House of God,—sons of revolutionary sires, and proud of descent from the Christian heroes and the Christian statesmen who won for us on the field of battle or in the halls of legislation our national freedom and our national fame—we may limit our recognition of the workings of God in our history to the acknowledgment of the gift to us and to all mankind of Washington!

That Providence which designed "this unblemished gentleman," to fill the measure of man's highest, noblest aspirations,—which raised him up, as it had prepared of old the Lawgiver and Leader of Israel, to lead his people to liberty and national life, which trained him in early years by hardships and reverses for the work given him to do, could not fail to lay the foundations of Washington's character in a reverent and abiding sense of his relations to his God. It is on this ground that the reverence for his character is so deep and universal. Washington was a Christian, fearing God and keeping His commandments. He ever attributed,—we quote his words,—"to the interposition of Providence; and not in any degree to his personal agency,

the complicated and mighty events of the Revolution and the adoption of the general government; claiming only the merit due to an honest zeal for the good of his country." In our admiration for the noble qualities displayed in the social, the military, the political life of Washington, we may never forget that they were based upon that sole foundation which could sustain and develop them amidst the storms of of passion, the temptations of ambition, and the seductive allurements of almost unlimited power. George Washington feared God, and recognized in religion and morality the sole sources of the proper character of a man and a citizen. The Father of his country was good in his greatness and great in his goodness!

We are all well aware that there were those in the past, as there are some in modern days, who would have us believe that Washington was only in outward seeming and show a believer in Christ. Mean men, doubting the reality of a nobleness they cannot comprehend, and unwilling to recognize as the source of Washington's greatness that reverent love and fear of God of which they are wholly ignorant, would seek to detract from his Christian character; and would have us regard him as a dissembler and a hypocrite, using the phrases and aping the manners of a holiness he did not possess. But these detractors forget that Washington's life, from the cradle to the

grave, was consistently Christian. His religious character grew with his years and deepened with his growth. In youth, in manhood, in age; in public and in private; in words and in deeds, he ever displayed that reverent recognition of the requirements, the restraints, the sustaining hopes of Christianity which prove the inner spiritual life—which attest his possession of what he himself has styled a "genuine, vital religion." The transcription of fixed rules for his conduct, speech and feelings, from the dictation of his excellent clerical instructor,* marked his early years, and show the increase of the boy "in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." His filial love and obedience, built upon the "commandment with promise," were conspicuous in his youth; and the dutiful son of a widowed mother was rewarded by God with long life and lasting renown. In an age the gross immorality and irreverence of which are detailed in tales too foul to read, Washington's youth was pure; his manhood was undefiled. At a time when irreligion was fashionable, and even the restraints of morality were ignored by youth of family and fortune, we find the young Virginian colonel, then but a little past his majority, acting as his own chaplain, reading prayers Sunday after Sunday at the head of his regiment on the frontiers, with a motley crowd of worshippers—Indians,

*The Rev. James Mayre, rector of Fredericksburg, Va.

half-breeds, back-woodsmen and soldiers, —gathered reverently about him. Recognizing the hand of Providence in his preservation at the massacre in which Braddock fell, it was Washington who read at midnight the Church's Office for Burial over his general's remains. At home, the temporalities as well as the spiritualities of his parish engrossed his thoughts and cares, and the devout lay-reader who had performed so faithfully the chaplain's work on the frontiers, became in peace a builder of churches and interested in every detail of parochial work. He was a constant attendant at the House of God, and his behavior there was ever so devout and reverential as to produce the happiest effects on the whole congregation. While never boasting of his religious feelings, he never shrank from the confession of his recognition of the presance and power of God. His devotion was not simply an outward show. The hypocrite is not apt to note in the privacy of a diary, open alone to the eye of God, his fasting and prayer when his country was in peril. The indifferent and Godless man will not kneel in an agony of outspoken, fervent supplication, as Washington did, at the partiug of a loved one's soul. The soldier and legislator was not ashamed, alone of his fellows, to bow the knee in prayer when, at the session of Continental Congress in Carpenter's Hall, Philadelphia, 1774, the offices of the Church were used

to preface the deliberations that were to yield to us a little later the prize of independence. At the head of the army he was humane, compassionate and forbearing, —a Christian leader in all things. The vices of the camp were sternly rebuked. God was owned, and honored in all that he did or said. It were impossible to simulate or affect the evident naturalness of the constant recognition of God in His providence, shaping the course of human affairs, seen in Washington's general orders, in his state papers, in addresses, in letters and in his private diaries. We may not forget the scene at Valley Forge when, on his knees, far away as he supposed from human eye, the general of the army was overheard praying to that God who rules the destinies of nations for his country's safety and her ultimate success. Kneeling at the chancel rail, as was his wont in early life, to receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ it was perhaps from necessity,—for chaplains were scarce and services few,— or it may have been from a scrupulous conscience in view of the distractions of war and the work of carnage occupying his thoughts, that he but rarely, if, indeed, on more than one or two occasions during the war, engaged in this crowning act of Christian worship. There is abundant testimony that, at the close of the strife, and from time to time in after years, he was again a communicating member of the Church of

Christ. We know his reverence for the Lord's Day; his habitual reading of God's Word; his daily retirement for meditation and prayer, his regular attendance on church, and his abundant deeds of Christian charity; and we may not question the testimony of Chief Justice Marshall,—his friend and biographer,—that he was, indeed, "a sincere believer in the Christian faith and a truly devout man." Death found him ready for the great change. He could say, "I am not afraid to go"—"'Tis well;" and with the open Word of God beside him and the words of prayer arising from stricken hearts about him, he closed his eyes on earth only to open them in the Paradise of God, beholding the King in His beauty.

God be praised for the gift to us of Washington, the patriot, the soldier, the hero, the statesman, the Christian! It is "this unblemished gentleman" who is the central figure of our country's past; the model for the present time, the heritage of all succeeding years. His life was "right as it respected his God, his country, and himself." His memory is our tie of brotherhood. His name is the watchword of our freedom, and that of all the world!

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